

## A New Musick Room

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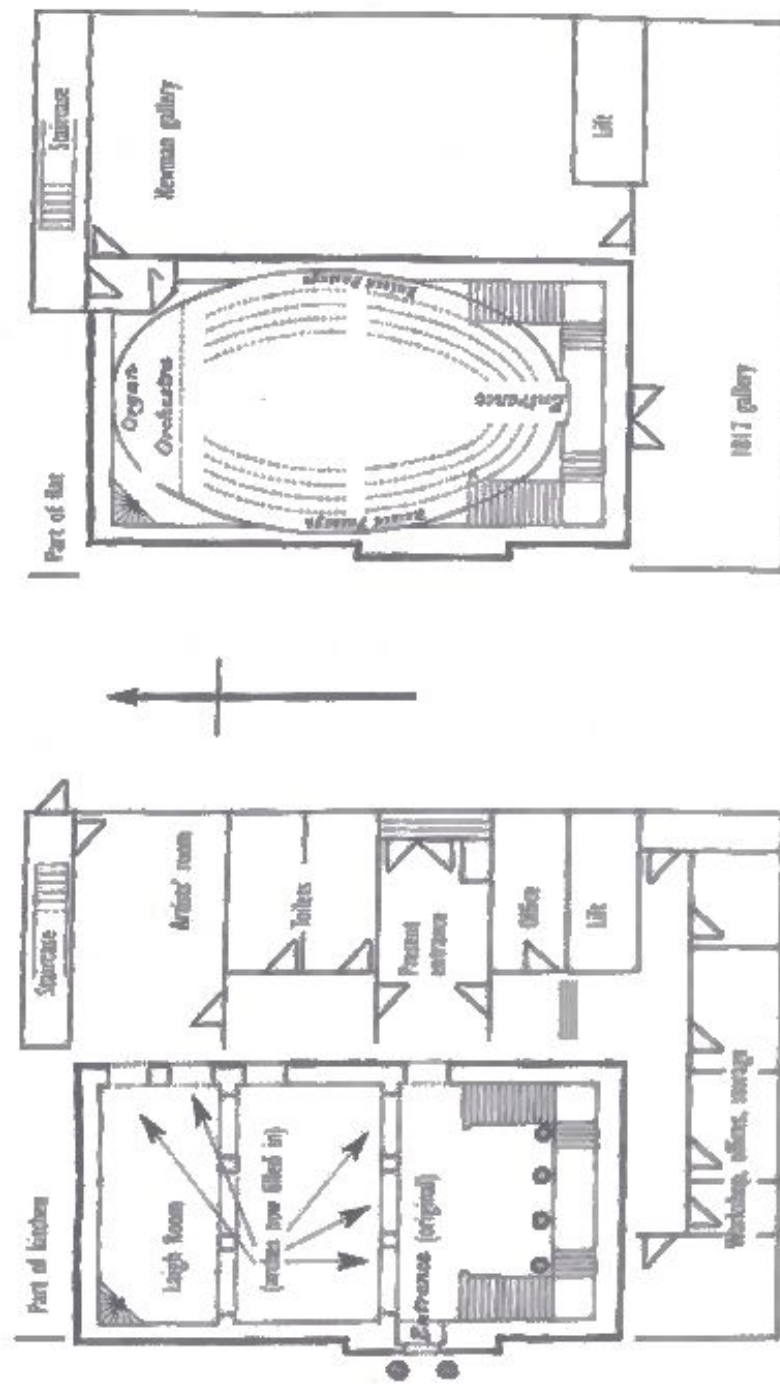
*St CECILIA*  
HALL



*Jane Blackie*

Ground floor

First floor



Sketch plan of the hall in its present state, superimposed on the drawings reproduced in David Fraser Harris's history. The musicians originally used the turnpike stair shown at the north-west corner of the old plans; they now use the stair from outside the artists' room and enter the hall in the north-east corner. The 18th century seating plan shown is not normally used: see the picture and caption on Page 24.

# A New Music Room

*A history of St Cecilia's Hall*

By Jane Blackie

St Cecilia's Hall stands on the south-east corner of Niddry Street and the Cowgate, in the heart of Edinburgh's Old Town. It is Scotland's oldest concert hall, built between 1761 and 1763 by Robert Mylne for the private concerts of the Edinburgh Musical Society, an organisation which flourished for nearly a century before it folded and sold up. After a succession of diverse owners, uses and alterations, the building was bought by its present owner, the University of Edinburgh, which reconstructed Mylne's original concert hall and substantially extended the premises to create its keyboard instrument museum.

This is not only one of the world's most important instrument museums, but also one which boasts the privilege of its own integral concert hall with the perfect acoustic for public recitals of early music on even the quietest clavichord.

## The Edinburgh Musical Society

Edinburgh's Musical Society, whose object was to perform weekly concerts "for mutual Diversion and Entertainment", was probably founded in the early 1700s; the members' constitution, drawn up in 1728, states clearly that the society had been flourishing for some time. This document, together with nearly seventy years of committee meeting minutes, the sederunt books, is in the city's public library. By 1728, the Musical Society's usual meeting place and concert venue was the deconsecrated Mary's Chapel in Niddry's Wynd. This lane, now built over, was one of the mediaeval thoroughfares which ran steeply between the High Street and the Cowgate, linking the two levels on which Edinburgh was built – the High Street on the ridge to the north, and the Cowgate in the valley to the south. Mary's Chapel and the bulk of Niddry's Wynd were demolished in 1786.

The Musical Society was a socially exclusive body which operated as an aristocratic gentlemen's club, limiting itself to seventy nominated members from Scotland's intellectual and social elite, drawn from the nobility, the church, the university and the upper professional classes. Many were prominent establishment figures and Freemasons, heavily dominated by the legal profession. Each year, the members elected the governor, deputy governor, treasurer and five directors. Membership was restricted to men but for certain performances, such as the big public concerts which marked the feast day of St Cecilia on 22 November, guests, including ladies, could be invited. All members were expected to be able to perform, either on an instrument or in the choir, but the instrumental section leaders and soloists, the "masters", were salaried, professional musicians. At first, the masters were drawn from local performers, such as the society's first leaders, William McGibbon and Adam Craig. Later, as the society became more ambitious, principals were engaged from France, England, Italy and Germany. Wind and brass players were recruited from the locally based regimental bands, and boy trebles from George Heriot's Hospital. The boys were paid between 6d (2.5p) and 2s 6d (12.5p) and rewarded with sugar candy.

Those three or four decades in Mary's Chapel represent a musical golden age in Scotland's cultural history. The best music, the newest music and the most popular compositions in vogue in London were bought for the society's expanding

library. Instruments were purchased for the players. The most talked-about singers were engaged for a whole season. The composer Geminiani performed there. Correspondence with Handel in 1753 produced authorised copies of his sacred music not yet published. But Mary's Chapel eventually proved too cramped for the enthusiastic audiences that the weekly concerts attracted, and already the popular oratorio performances for the public had to take place in the Assembly Room in nearby Bell's Wynd. These premises were not ideal and the hiring fee, two guineas an evening, was high. Cost was not an insurmountable problem for the noblemen and gentlemen of the Musical Society at this stage: their problem was space. In 1752, two decisions were made: to change the constitution in order to increase membership, and to start a fund "for a new room".

A joint venture with the directors of the assembly, commissioning a design by John, Robert and James Adam, who were members of the society, came to nothing, largely because John Adam was dubious about the unattractive site – the North Braehead opposite the Tron Kirk – which would have resulted in many basement and underground rooms, the excavation of which threatened prohibitive cost. A second, less ambitious scheme, combining forces with the Royal College of Physicians, which was urgently in need of larger premises, was also abandoned. Eventually, the Musical Society opted to build its new hall as a solo venture.

Fund-raising continued, with notices in the local *Caledonian Mercury* inviting donations from the public. Presumably persuaded by John Adam against the North Braehead idea, the Musical Society continued its site-hunting. In November 1759, its deputy governor, George Drummond, then in his fifth term as Edinburgh's lord provost, announced to the society that "the Directors had fixt upon an area of 77 feet by 41 for building a new Musick Room lying in the same Wynd, a little below Mary's Chapel..." The site was bought for £300. By the end of that year, the legal preliminaries were in motion and in January 1760, planning permission was granted by the Dean of Guild Court. No further reference is made in the sederunt books until 15 June 1760, when the committee met to peruse "a Plan of the new Musick Hall" – a plan, however, not by the Adam brothers, much to their surprise, as they were clearly expecting the contract, but by their contemporary, Robert Mylne.

## Robert Mylne (1733-1811)

Robert was the elder son of Thomas Mylne, the city surveyor, a magistrate and deacon of the wrights (head of the guild for those in the building trade). He was a descendant of John Mylne, the fifteenth century master mason to the Crown, a hereditary office held until the Union of 1707 by six successive generations of Mylnes, several of whom left their mark (literally) on important Edinburgh buildings.

Robert was born at Powderhall, his father's estate, which lay midway between Edinburgh and Leith. After qualifying as a stonemason in 1754, Robert took himself and his brother William to Paris for a brief study course, then to Rome for four years of serious study. Rome offered not only the celebrated Academy of St Luke, where the brothers enrolled as students, but also unlimited opportunities for research and drawing the classical antiquities – and, lucratively, guiding British “milordi” round them. At the Academy of St Luke, Robert distinguished himself by winning the highly coveted first prize for architecture, the first British student to do so, and the gold and silver medals. In a magnificent public graduation ceremony, he was elected a member of the academy. As well as attracting the admiration of established architects such as Piranesi, Robert also secured his first English and Scots clients and future patrons. The aesthetic of Classical Rome and its construction techniques made a profound impression on him and were to dominate his style throughout his working life.

Following a study tour of northern Europe, he sailed to London. His arrival, early in 1759, coincided with the national competition for a design for the city's second Thames bridge, at Blackfriars. Mylne entered the competition and, despite loud public controversy over his use of semi-elliptical arches and his Scottish nationality, he won. This second major public triumph proved his fine engineering skills and firmly established his long and successful career. London became his home and, although he was to advise and design for several prestigious clients in Scotland, among them the city of Glasgow and the fifth Duke of Argyll, most of his work was carried out in England. In addition to designing private and public buildings, Mylne advised parliament on water companies, became an authority on canal construction and was appointed surveyor to several cathedrals.

He is buried in St Paul's Cathedral, one of those in his care, next to the cathedral's architect, Sir Christopher Wren.

Of Mylne's prolific output south of the Border, not much now remains. Many of his buildings fell victim to demolition or unrecognisable transformation. Blackfriars Bridge, with its controversial semi-elliptical arches, was taken down in the late nineteenth century, to be rebuilt and widened. Scotland has preserved a richer Mylne legacy, although his only surviving Edinburgh building, apart from the much altered and enlarged Whitefoord House, is St Cecilia's Hall.

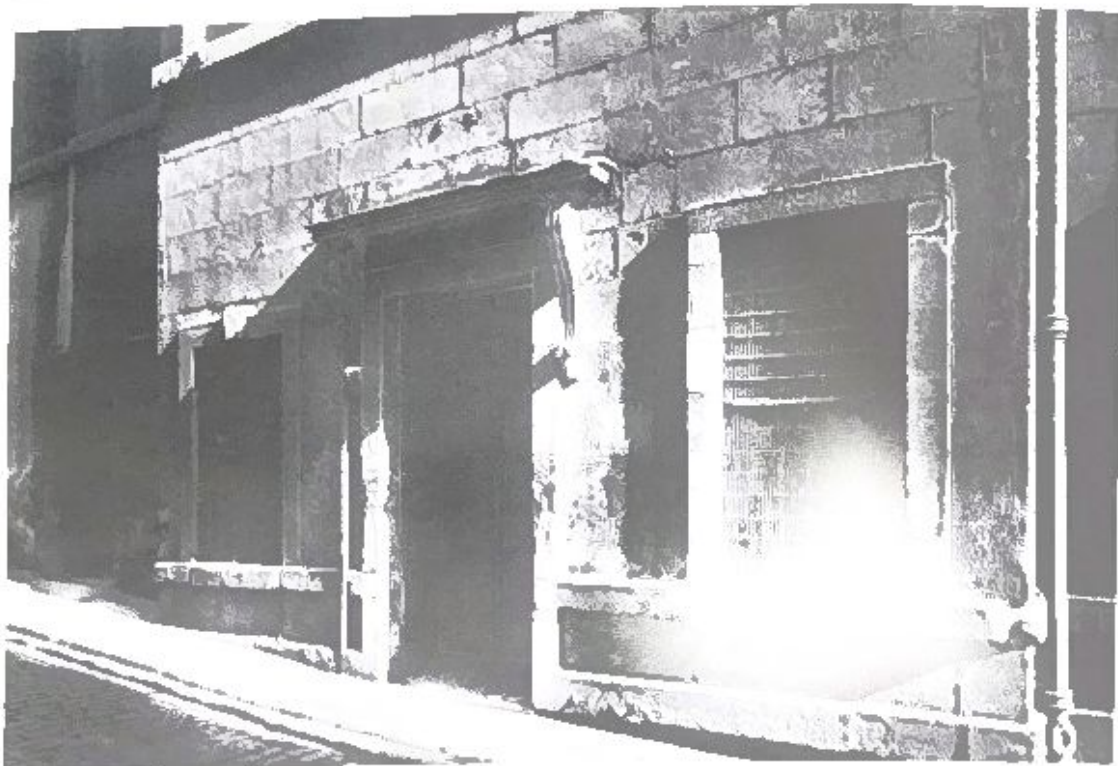
## 'A new musick room', 1763-90

Exactly why the Edinburgh Musical Society favoured Mylne as its architect in place of the Adam brothers has not been documented. But at the meeting which approved his design for the concert hall, it lost no time in advertising in both local newspapers for tenders from “Undertakers ... and Estimatis”. Mylne, though maintaining a supervisory role from London, appointed his brother William, now returned home (and soon to design the North Bridge) as his chief mason. George Paterson was the on-site architect. Work started on 9 May 1761 and was completed by the autumn of 1763, at a final cost of £1,627 11s 10d, plus the fee of ten guineas each to Robert Mylne and George Paterson. The result was one of the earliest neoclassical buildings in old Edinburgh, and the first purpose-built concert hall in Scotland. The opening concert was given on 16 December 1763, as announced in the *Caledonian Mercury*:

The Gentlemen of the Musical Society have appointed St Cecilia's [sic] Concert to be held in their own Hall, on Friday next the 16th Inst. at 5 o'clock afternoon.

There is a ring of pride in the phrase “their own Hall” at last.

The original setting, however, requires some effort of imagination to visualise. Prior to the construction of the South Bridge in 1785-88, which was to alter the entire topography of the Old Town, the lay-out of the area between the High Street and the Cowgate followed more or less the mediaeval street pattern. Picturesque, steep and crowded, Niddry's Wynd offered very limited building space. Mylne's solution was to design a two-storey building, embedded within and behind older existing houses, with the concert hall occupying the whole of



*The original main entrance of St Cecilia's Hall, some years on to Niddry's Wynd and no longer used. The photograph was probably taken in the 1950s.*

the upper storey. The main entrance, on the west front, which boasted a classical portico with Doric columns, was approached from the wynd across its own private courtyard, where sedan chairs were parked. The doorway still exists, although the portico was destroyed when the South Bridge was built. Very little of the facade, otherwise, was visible, as older houses projected on both sides of the entrance, and what was visible was huddled (roughcast). A second entrance on the south side led from the Cowgate, approached by a narrow passage.

Despite all the admiration St Cecilia's Hall attracted, it seems, curiously, to have eluded eighteenth century artists and printmakers. Mylne's architectural drawings have not so far been found. A picture can be drawn, however, from the Musical Society's treasurers' accounts, which contain detailed bills and receipts from the builders, craftsmen and suppliers. These, with reminiscences penned by musicians and visitors, offer some idea of the original interior.

The eighteenth century concert-goer would cross the courtyard, approach the main entrance under its portico, and enter the brightly lit lobby. The most striking feature of the lobby today, and one of the few remnants of the original fabric, is the screen of Roman Doric columns which supports the upper landing. These columns were originally painted and gilded. The newcomer would have been impressed by the generously sized "scale and plate" double staircase — not a common sight in mid-century Scotland. Both flights of stairs and the lobby floor were carpeted. The east wall of the lobby was opened out as part of the alterations in the twentieth century.

The other ground floor rooms had a variety of uses. They are described variously in the accounts as "the rehearsal room", the "lough (lower) room" and the "waiting room" — this probably for servants on concert nights, or possibly for any personally owned sedan chairs. On this floor, too, were storerooms and a coal cellar. The open arches (semi-elliptical again) which divide the lough room today may originally have been infilled to form a load-bearing wall, as the accounts books indicate that there were two separate room-spaces here. A back staircase, probably turnpike (spiral), led the musicians from the north-west corner of the farther room directly up to the stage of the concert room. The small round window, today blocked, facing north up Niddry Street, may have been on this now lost back stair.

The concert room, which enchanted most people who wrote of it, occupied the whole of the upper floor. Its specifications are said to be unique. Visually and acoustically, it excited a lot of comment. "The best and most beautiful concert room I have ever yet seen," wrote the judge, Lord Cockburn, many years later in his *Memorials*. The publisher George Thomson, a member of the Musical Society, provided a description as he remembered it, which is quoted in Grant's *Old and New Edinburgh*.

The hall... was an exact oval, having a concave elliptical ceiling, and was remarkable for the clear and perfect conveyance of sounds without responding echoes, as well as for the judicious manner in which the seating was arranged. In this last respect, I have seen no concert room equal to it either in London or Paris.

The orchestra was erected at the upper end of the hall opposite to the door of entrance; a portion of the area in the centre or widest part was without any seats.

and served as a small promenade where friends could chat together during the interval of a performance.

The seats were all FIXED [sic] down on both sides of the hall, and each side was raised by a gradual elevation from the level area backward, the rows of seats behind each other ... an arrangement much preferable to that commonly adopted of placing all the seats upon a level behind each other, for thus the whole company must look one way and see each other's backs.

The planning of this much lauded tiered seating, "in the form of an amphitheatre", as Hugo Arnot, Edinburgh's late eighteenth century historian, put it, seems to have involved the society's members, according to a reference in the sederunt books of July 1762. There is no reference, however, to their involvement in any other aspect of the interior design. The seats were in fact wooden benches with horsehair cushioning, covered in black leather. Such seating arrangements were standard in Italian opera houses and, as Michael Forsyth notes in his book *Buildings for Music*, helped acoustically by reducing reverberation. The same idea had been adopted in the Holywell Music Room, Oxford, Britain's oldest surviving concert hall, which opened in 1748.

The room was windowless (an excellent shield from external noise), natural light entering solely through the cupola in the centre of the ceiling. The local historian and publisher Alexander Kincaid wrote in his 1787 *History of Edinburgh*:

The amount of light introduced into the room by this one vertical light ... is remarkable. It is impossible to contemplate this room without concluding that he was an artistic and original man who designed it.

The cupola also incorporated a ventilator.

Candlelight was supplied by means of brass "branches" (ornamental brackets) fixed to mirrors round the walls, and by seven lustres (chandeliers) hung from the ceiling. Costly wax candles, according to the treasurers' accounts, were shipped from London. The account books also indicate details of elegant decoration, since lost. A dado skirted the walls, level with the highest row of seats, above which the unpanelled plaster walls were colour-washed in green. Enriched plaster cornicing decorated the ceiling which, like that in the lobby, was painted white. The doors, painted to simulate mahogany, had gilded architraves. Heating was by coal in iron stoves bought from the Carron Company near Falkirk.

A large three-quarter length portrait of Hew Dalrymple, Lord Drummore (1690-1755), commissioned by the Musical Society from Allan Ramsay in 1754, hung somewhere in St Cecilia's Hall. Dalrymple, a prominent judge, was a supportive member of the society and held office as its governor for 20 years, but died before St Cecilia's Hall was built. The portrait is now in the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.

For the first decade or so in the new hall, a chamber organ was lent by John Callander of Craigforth, an advocate and Musical Society member. It was installed in October 1763, in a specially constructed niche at the back of the stage. Meanwhile, the organ fund continued to grow and a new instrument was eventually commissioned from the great London-based organ builder Johannes Snetzler. The society's insistence on a dulciana stop, which Snetzler tried unsuccessfully to resist, caused several years' delay; and before the organ was finally installed, in 1775, the niche had to be rebuilt and made higher to accommodate the extra pipes. This organ has unfortunately not survived. The instrument occupying that position today is a Snetzler type, dating from about 1750, installed in 1968.

The enthusiasm of certain writers and historians has generated the unsubstantiated claim that the auditorium was capable of holding 500, a puzzling figure, given that today's fire regulations permit a maximum of 244. Indeed, a larger number would feel uncomfortable and the room was not without its eighteenth century critics: "rather too confined", commented Edward Topham in 1774, while Samuel Richardson complained in 1768 that "the roof ... is thought to be rather too low, and the room is more warm than is agreeable in summer". By this time, summer concerts were given in late July or early August, to coincide with the annual Leith races.

The famous acoustics have also engendered some argument. The combination of coved ceiling, wooden floor, unbroken wall line and smooth plaster produced the perfect acoustic for the baroque repertoire of solo harpsichord and small chamber group. The architectural historian, Deborah Howard, has suggested that, in addition, there may have been shallow, inverted underfloor acoustic arches, similar to the masonry "saucer" built below the floor of the Teatro Nuovo in Parma, to encourage even sound distribution across the auditorium. This may

*Plan 12<sup>th</sup> April 1782*

*\* 7 Periodicall Overture*

*Song*

*\* 1<sup>st</sup> Trio Op<sup>o</sup> 3 — Corelli —*  
*By Sig<sup>r</sup> Pappo — Reinagle & Methy*

*Act 2.*

*Manuscript Concertante of Bach*  
*Flauto Obligato*

*Song*

*Ad libitum — Sig<sup>r</sup> Pappo*

*Song — Ah non Lasciame — Sachini*  
*Sig<sup>r</sup> Core*

*Act 3.*

*\* \* \* Overture of Van Mulders Op<sup>o</sup> 1<sup>st</sup>*

*Song — Londa ad Mat. Sig<sup>r</sup> Core*

*\* \* \* 40 Period<sup>o</sup> Overture by Haydn*



A programme or "plan" of a typical Musical Society concert, held in St Cecilia's Hall on 12 April 1782 and featuring works by Corelli, Haydn and "Bach" — either Johann Christian Bach or Carl Philip Emanuel Bach. Concerts were typically in three parts (or "acts") each of up to forty minutes' duration,

separated by intervals. A "periodical overture" was a work issued, like a literary periodical, to subscribers by music publishers throughout the year. "Overture" ("ouverture") being synonymous with "symphony", this programme includes Haydn's 40th symphony.

be a reason for the much quoted but never substantiated claim that St Cecilia's Hall was "modelled on the opera house at Parma". With a large audience, however, the acoustic was not perfect from every seating position and in about 1772, the Musical Society found it necessary to erect wooden pilasters round the walls of the auditorium. These would "stop" excessive reverberation, thus creating a more sympathetic acoustic for the orchestral forces of the later, classical composers, Stamitz and Haydn.

A collection of the Musical Society's concert programmes is held in Edinburgh University Library. That illustrated is typical, with the performer named but not the work or its composer, and each of the three "acts" comprising a mixture of vocal and instrumental solos and ensembles.

Concert life continued in much the same way as in Mary's Chapel, with three or four big oratorio performances annually, the weekly society concerts and occasional benefit concerts for the "masters". The society's library catalogues, preserved in Edinburgh University Library and Edinburgh Public Library, supply an idea of its comprehensive repertoire: Handel's oratorios and concerti grossi remained regular favourites, as did Corelli, Pergolesi and other earlier "classics". As the century progressed, the new music found its way into the library in St Cecilia's Hall, and the catalogue of 1782 contains publications by the next generation of composers — Abel, JC Bach, Stamitz, Boccherini and Mozart, with, increasingly, Haydn. Frequent performances were given of works by Thomas Erskine, sixth Earl of Kelly (1732-1781), one of Scotland's abler native composers and for many years the Musical Society's deputy governor. He studied with Stamitz in Mannheim and is credited with introducing Britain to the new, classical Mannheim style.

Celebrated singers who performed in St Cecilia's Hall between engagements elsewhere included the German soprano Gertrude Mara and the Italian castrato Ferdinando Tenducci, the latter at a salary of £150 per season. Tenducci was famed in Edinburgh for his apparently sensational performances of Scots folksong settings. Masters included the cellists Johann Schedky and Joseph Reinagle, the violinists Girolamo Stabilini and Wilhelm Cramer and the keyboard players Stephen Clarke and Domenico Corri. Distinguished members of the audience included the young Robert Burns, early in 1787, taken as a guest during his winter stay in the capital.

## The Musical Society's last decade

The heyday of St Cecilia's Hall was, sadly, relatively brief. Problems already inherent in the Musical Society became insoluble. Balancing its overwhelming popularity against its insistence on exclusivity of membership resulted in tensions: social and economic factors were already rendering an aristocratic music club out of date. The policy of hiring out the premises was also exclusive: church choirs and other respectable bodies were permitted, but anything more exotic, such as the application from a conjuror "to show his tricks" was "absolutely refused". Balancing the account books proved impossible: members were lax in paying subscriptions and the deficit dating from the building of the hall was sustainable only so long as subscriptions were paid promptly. Socially and physically, the whole city was in flux, with the creation of the entirely new, planned town north of the High Street, and with it the exodus of many fashionable families from the Old Town. Public concerts sprang up in various New Town venues, and in 1787 the city opened its splendidly spacious Assembly Rooms, with a concert hall, in George Street.

A major cause of Musical Society malaise was the construction of the massive South Bridge, part of the city's scheme to extend southwards and to create a more or less horizontal link between the South Side and the High Street. This proved a far more drastic operation than the building of the earlier North Bridge in that it required the wholesale demolition of large built-up areas on both the upper and lower levels south of the High Street. Robert Adam was appointed architect, but the city's South Bridge Trustees found the scale of Adam's spacious scheme extravagant and settled for a modification of it, pared down by two local architects, Robert Kay and Alexander Laing.

Niddry's Wynd was almost completely destroyed, and very severely narrowed, realigned further east beyond the original building line on that side. To accommodate this realignment, it was found necessary to demolish St Cecilia's portico and private courtyard which had projected so far as to obstruct the planned route completely. The wynd was then renamed Niddry Street, its west side now comprising the inelegant backs of the new double-height South Bridge buildings.

Such was the disturbance caused by the demolition and construction work that concerts had to be held elsewhere, and as compensation for this and for the loss of its general amenity, the Musical Society was given the adjacent strip of ground to the south, running along the Cowgate. St Cecilia's Hall, instead of looking out over its private courtyard surrounded by old harled houses, now opened directly on to a dismal, narrow back street of towering tenements eight storeys high.

Faced with declining enthusiasm, the society's committee sharply increased the annual subscription to three and a half guineas, and reduced its final spring series to one concert per fortnight. The *Scots Magazine* of 13 January 1798 commented:

We are glad to see that the Musical Society have resolved to keep up so old and respectable an entertainment. For many years St Cecilia's Hall was considered as the most elegant amusement in this metropolis.

By now, however, it seemed that the demise of the society was generally expected. Two of the last three concerts in St Cecilia's Hall were produced by other, independent entrepreneurs. On 10 April 1798, that given by one Vogel was attended by the Duc de Berri, nephew of Louis XVI, while living in exile at Holyrood. During race week that year, two events were advertised: on 31 July, Corri directed a performance of Michael Kelly's new *Dramatic Romance of Bluebeard* and on Friday 3 August, the Musical Society held what was probably its very last concert. Its programme has not survived but the *Edinburgh Courant* announced it, perhaps pointedly, as "A Concert of SELECT MUSICK". A final notice in the *Courant* announced a general meeting of the society on Christmas Eve that year to determine "...whether the Society shall be immediately dissolved or continued ..."

After an unsuccessful attempt to let its building, the Musical Society placed an announcement in the *Evening Courant* of 7 February 1801:

The Director requests a GENERAL MEETING on Tuesday 7th February at 3 o'clock in St. Cecilia's Hall, to take measures for disposing of their property and winding up the affairs of the Society, when it is requested that all members shall attend.

The decision was made to sell up and a public roup (auction) was held in

March. The few offers made were, however, unacceptably low. The following notice appeared in the *Courant* of 1 June

### ST. CECILIA'S HALL

Upset price reduced to SIX HUNDRED POUNDS. To be SOLD by public voluntary roup on Wednesday the third day of June 1801, between the hours of twelve and one o'clock afternoon, at the Royal Exchange Coffee-House, Edinburgh, ST CECILIA'S HALL, with the whole adjoining apartments, situated in Niddry Street and having also an entry from the Cowgate. The Hall is 60 feet long by 36 feet wide and of a proportionate height. It is completely [sic] fitted up with seats, and is extremely well calculated for a place of worship or other public meeting. On the ground floor is an apartment 34 feet long by 21 feet wide ... and several other conveniences. There is adjoining to the Hall an Area, to which the purchaser of the hall will have the right, extending along Niddry Street about thirty feet, and from the corner of Niddry Street along the Cowgate about forty feet, on which shops or houses may be built to great advantage.

This second roup was successful. The purchasers were the trustees of the Baptist Church whose offer of £600 was accepted. The price represented a loss of more than £1,000 on the original building cost, perhaps reflecting the start of the deterioration of land values in the Cowgate area – although the Baptist Church was able to sell for more than double that price only eight years later. Neither the Musical Society nor the Baptists attempted to make use of or capitalise on the adjoining plot of land.

The Musical Society also had to dispose of its possessions. The *Courant* advertisement continued:

THERE IS ALSO TO BE SOLD the ORGAN belonging to the MUSICAL SOCIETY. It was built by the famous SNETZLER in London, and contains the following stops, VIZ:

– Open Diapason, Stopt Diapason, Dulciana, Principal, Flute, Twelfth, Sesquialtera and Cornet. It has several PEDALS and is eminently calculated for a Chapel, being the most powerful and complete instrument of the kind in Scotland, next to the Organ in the English Episcopal Chapel in Edinburgh

The Snetzler organ found a home in the George Street Assembly Rooms, but

was removed at some point during the nineteenth century and, according to Henry Farmer, appears to have been dismantled and incorporated into other organs around the city.

### The Baptist Church 1801-1809

Edinburgh's Baptist Church had been founded in 1765 by Robert Carmichael who was soon joined by Archibald McLean. McLean, who became a theologian of note, continued as one of the pastors in the St Cecilia's Hall era. Originally the Baptist congregation had rented the Magdalen Chapel in the Cowgate, until their own meeting house was built in Richmond Court, off Bristo Place, the first purpose-built place of worship for a Baptist church in Scotland. By the end of the century, the congregation had outgrown it. Within a few years, St Cecilia's Hall was also to prove too small for the growing membership and a larger church was built in Arthur Street in the Pleasance.

No record of the interior appearance of St Cecilia's Hall during its occupancy by the Baptists has been traced, but it is thought that its furnishing was probably similar to that of Edinburgh's surviving Glasite meeting house in Barony Street. There were sloping book boards, referred to by the next owners, the Freemasons, who subsequently levelled them. Baptisms, which involved total immersion, were still held in the Water of Leith at Canonmills, a practice which continued well into the nineteenth century.

In August 1809, the Baptist Church sold St Cecilia's Hall for £1,400 to the Grand Lodge of Scotland, which was in need of a large building for a Freemasons' Hall. As the Arthur Street church was not completed until 1811, the Baptists were allowed the continued use of St Cecilia's Hall meantime, paying "a reasonable rent" to the Grand Lodge.

### The Freemasons' Hall, 1811-1845

The Freemasons' Hall, formerly St Cecilia's Hall, was consecrated on 21 November 1809. Dramatic alterations ensued. In addition to the hall and its adjacent piece

of ground, the Grand Lodge was able to acquire two old houses to the east of the building, lying between it and Dickson's Close. By 1812 they had extended the premises further by erecting a capacious two-storey wing on the vacant site fronting the Cowgate. The ground floor of this was leased out as four shops. On the floor above was, eventually, the single elegant room with five south-facing floor-length windows, which today is one of the galleries housing the keyboard instruments. The original plan for this wing indicates two rooms, separated by a movable screen, but each with its own entry from different points of the stairs and landings, requiring a complete rebuilding of the upper part of Mylne's staircase.

Its architect was John Thain (1764-1827) who, as a Freemason, served on the Grand Lodge committee. Thain was employed as mason and builder by the city, and later became draughtsman to William Henry Playfair. High upon the exterior wall, at roof level, above the Cowgate, Thain's stone plaque is still clearly visible from the parapet of the South Bridge, inscribed: "FREE MASONS HALL 1812"

An entry in the Masonic account books implies that the concert hall was dramatically altered at this stage and "squared"; that is, the curved inner walls were removed, to expose the outer rectangular shell. The room remained rectangular in shape until its conversion in the 1960s. The coved, elliptical ceiling and its cupola were evidently retained although the original framing for the cupola was at some point replaced. Gas lighting was installed. By early 1829 the grand lodge had extended the property still further by buying the small house immediately to the north in Niddry Street.

The larger rooms were regularly rented out. One of the long-term tenants of the Grand Lodge was Leonard Horner's newly formed Edinburgh School of Arts, the precursor of the James Watt Institute and Heriot-Watt University, which offered evening classes to young mechanics, apprentices and school-leavers. Demand for places, according to the directors' reports, was overwhelming. On 16 October 1821, the school of arts opened its (Niddry Street) doors "in the presence of the Lord Provost and several of the most distinguished individuals who patronised the institution". The former concert hall became the school's first lecture room, where Horner delivered his opening address, followed by the inaugural lecture, on chemistry, by Dr Andrew Fyfe. The syllabus, which at first

offered only chemistry and natural philosophy, expanded rapidly; by the following summer, classes were also given in architecture, farricry and mathematics. Later on, veterinary medicine, elementary engineering and technical drawing were added. By 1825, the role comprised more than 400 students, who included two musical instrument makers, one footman and two dentists. End-of-term aural examinations were a public occasion, held in "the Large Hall" – the former concert room – in the imposing presence of all the founding fathers and benefactors. One diligent student in these early days of the school of arts was the young James Nasmyth, the future inventor of the steam hammer, while the impressive teaching staff included William Dick, the future founder of Edinburgh University's veterinary school.

The "Small Hall" – the Freemasons' 1812 room – was the library of the school of arts, well stocked with "between 300 and 400 volumes" of up-to-date scientific and technical books. Students perused them here on weekday nights, in the comfort of a coal fire and gas lighting. But, as with previous occupiers, the premises proved too small for the demand, and perhaps somewhat inadequate for the classes of the enthusiastic Dr Fyfe – "The process of Brewing, Distilling, Wine, Rum, Brandy, Gin and Vinegar-making; Baking, Tanning, the Manufacture of Soap ... as much as possible illustrated by Experiments" – so the school of arts moved to various rented rooms nearby until it raised the means to build its own college, the James Watt Institute on Chambers Street.

Eventually the hall became too small for the larger meetings of the grand lodge. In 1838 the Freemasons decided to meet in the George Street Assembly Rooms for an annual rent of £20, and to let St Cecilia's Hall permanently. They may have found difficulty in letting, however, as records show that they continued to meet in their own hall until 1845. Finally, the entire Niddry Street complex was sold to the Edinburgh Town Council, for entry at Whitsun 1845. The sale realised £1,800, substantially less than the combined purchase price and conversion costs, and for some years the Grand Lodge had no permanent home. The Freemasons' Hall on George Street (the predecessor of the present hall, which replaced it in 1912) was not completed and consecrated until February 1859.

Meanwhile, the area of Niddry Street and the Cowgate was deteriorating in terms of human overcrowding and urban decay: "... the last retreat nowadays of destitution and disease", observed Cockburn in his *Memorials*.



*Dr Bell's School, an illustration from Grant's Old and New Edinburgh, attributed to James Sidey and dated prior to 1880. It depicts the former concert room, now rectangular, with a gallery across the south wall, and sash windows.*

## Dr Bell's School, 1845-1890

For the next 46 years, the building flourished as a successful and very popular school. It was one of two "Dr Bell's" schools administered by the city, funded by the colossal fortune bequeathed for educational purposes by the Fife-born clergyman and educationist, the Rev Dr Andrew Bell (1753-1832). Bell was the founder of the Madras System, an idiosyncratic teaching scheme he devised while working in Madras – a monitorial method which involved a hierarchy of abler

pupils teaching slower ones. But although his system was useful in India when short of teachers, and championed by many charity schools in England when short of funds, it was not, in general, accepted in Scotland. By 1845, the Madras System had been phased out of English institutions and it was never adopted in the Niddry Street school. Suitable final year scholars in Niddry Street were, however, encouraged to assist the staff as preparation for formal teacher training. Preparing children for a vocation was a strong Bell principle, and one or two good Edinburgh teachers began their training as assistants in the Niddry Street Bell School.

HM inspectors' reports reveal that from an initial roll of 500 in 1845, the numbers rose to a staggering 900 in 1863, with a full-time staff of six, plus visiting teachers for singing and for sewing, and no fewer than sixteen assistants. All lessons were held upstairs, mostly in the former concert hall, which was divided by movable screens, and "in a room at the North end of it". The 1812 room was used for teaching infants, while the ground floor provided two segregated indoor playgrounds, which led to two playgrounds outside, in the yard to the east of the building.

A trustees' report of July 1853 refers to a single flight of stairs in the lobby – that on the west, the Niddry Street side. The opposite flight had either been removed or walled up at some point and was not reinstated until over a century later. The former concert room, now rectangular, had at some time prior to 1853 either had sash windows inserted or possibly "blind" windows opened up – it is presumed by the school trustees rather than the Freemasons. Across the south end of the hall ran a wooden gallery whose date cannot be ascertained. Both these features are portrayed in the mid-nineteenth century drawing attributed to the Edinburgh artist, James Sidey.

With the passing of the Educational Endowments (Scotland) Act of 1882, many trust-endowed schools in the capital were unable to escape transfer to the charge of the city, under the new Edinburgh Educational Trust. The two Bell schools were absorbed into the school board system; the Niddry Street building was sold by roup in May 1890 and changed its use yet again.

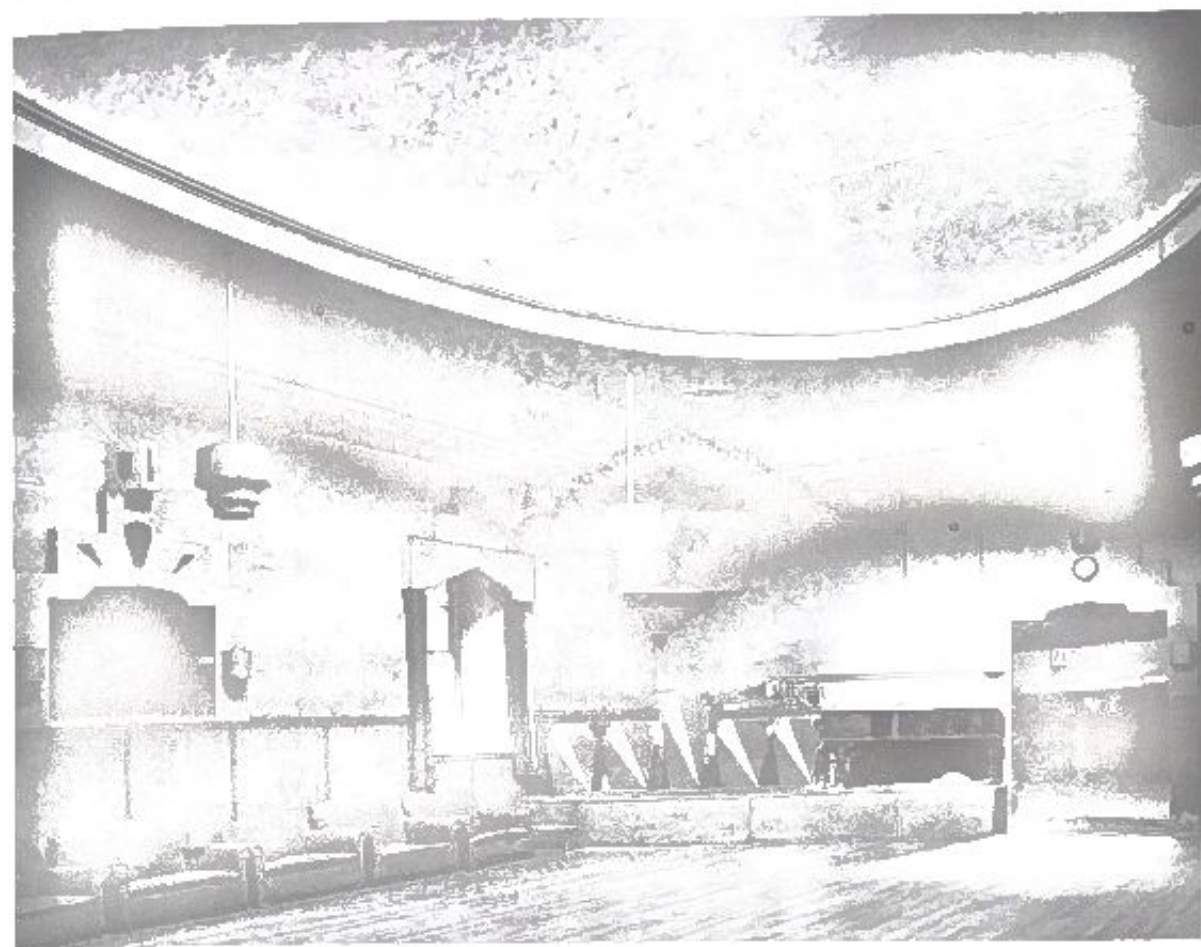
## 40-44 Niddry Street, 1890-1933

A bookbinding firm, George Cooper & Co, took ownership of the property with the exception of the four Cowgate shops which the school board had sold separately. Apparatus for bookbinding and paper-ruling now occupied the place. Three entrances numbered at various times 40, 42, 44 and 50, opened off Niddry Street, stretching from the "small house to the North" (today's kitchen) to the original main entrance, the furthest south. One door stood in the north-facing wall of the projecting façade, which David Fraser Harris, St Cecilia's Hall's first historian, identified as the original eighteenth century entrance for the musicians, and which is discernible today, though walled up. These doors led to separate parts of the building, partitioned off from each other, and leased variously to a printer of school exercise books, a japanning and glass-embossing workshop, and Cartton's furniture store – typical of the many small industries in this area of the Old Town at that time. Two of the separately owned shops in the Cowgate wing became a pub, the Bridges Bar.

The surviving partner of George Cooper & Co was Andrew Cairns, who wound up the business in 1904 and semi-retired, but continued to let his property which was in time inherited by his daughter, Magdalen. Without the vision of this remarkable individual in a difficult era for building conservation, the future of St Cecilia's hall might have been at risk.

## The Excelsior Ballroom, 1933-1959

For the next quarter of a century, Miss Cairns continued to let the ground floor to the owner of a furniture store, walled off from the original main entrance and single surviving staircase. Upstairs, meanwhile, the former concert hall had been transformed into a palais de danse, rejoicing in the name the Excelsior Ballroom. The ballroom was immensely popular, particularly during the Second World War, with local residents and servicemen on leave. One reason for its success was its sprung floor, "the best dance-floor in town"; another was the renowned Excelsior Band and its successor, the New Excelsior Band; a third was the ballroom's strict code of respectability, which is well documented, despite some recent unsubstantiated attempts to suggest the opposite.



*The Excelsior Ballroom, showing the bandstand in the north-west corner, the grand piano and the art deco lights and mirrors.*

The interior was full-blown Art Deco. The Excelsior Band played on a dais in the north-west corner of the hall, joined on occasion by a singer. Refreshments were served on the balcony in the earlier years, then in the 1812 room, converted into a cafeteria.

When the popularity of dance halls waned in the 1950s, the enterprising Miss Cairns closed the Excelsior Ballroom and undertook a costly programme of structural repair and redecoration. Appreciative of the hall's historical associations, although unaware of the elliptical original, she had long intended to resurrect her ballroom as a concert hall. This ambition was realised on 24 April 1959, when she organised a professional concert of Scottish music and verse in celebration of the Robert Burns bicentenary. An opening address was

given by the former under-secretary of state for Scotland, Sir John McEwen, chairman of the Scottish Committee for the Arts Council and president of the Saltire Society. The concert room, however, remained rectangular, with its large windows, and with the balcony over the southern end. Miss Cairns also resurrected the building's name – St Cecilia's Hall.

Serious maintenance problems with the north gable discouraged any further enterprise, as did her advancing years, so at the end of that year Miss Cairns decided to sell the entire premises, but only to a buyer who would safeguard the building's future. She approached the University of Edinburgh, which, expanding and short of space, immediately saw the potential and agreed to buy.

## The University of Edinburgh 1959-

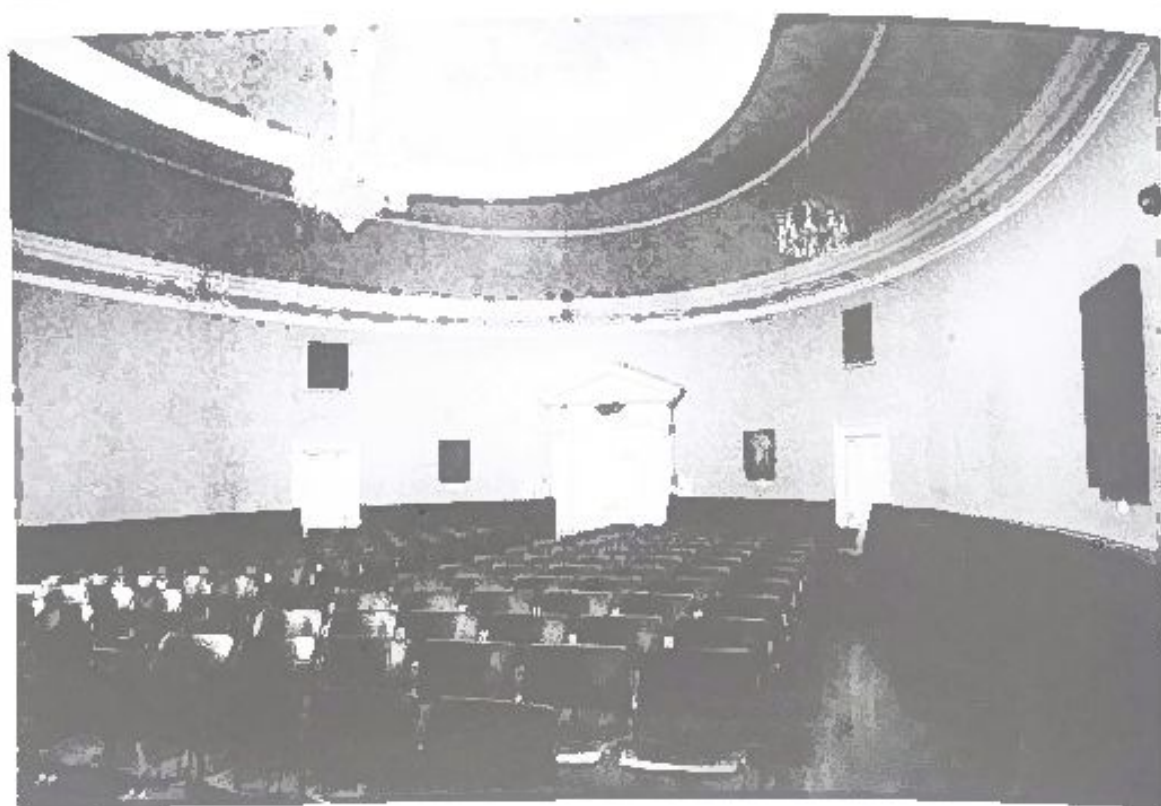
With the British university expansion of the 1960s, Edinburgh was faced, *inter alia*, with enlarging and re-housing its music faculty. A crucial factor in its building programme was the offer from Raymond Russell (1922-1964) of his collection of early keyboard instruments. An English scholar, antiquarian, recitalist and pioneer of serious technical research into historical instrument building, Russell was already the author of two academic articles on the post-1800 harpsichord and of the major work, *The Harpsichord and the Clavichord: a Survey*, published in 1958. In addition, he had amassed from all over Europe his magnificent and highly selective collection of rare and important harpsichords, spinets, virginals and clavichords dating from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Contemplating working abroad for two years prompted Russell to offer Edinburgh University the gift of nineteen instruments from his collection. The university, whose music faculty already possessed six historical keyboard instruments of its own, was enthusiastic but had nowhere to house a collection of such size. The question of suitable accommodation was therefore solved by the acquisition of St Cecilia's Hall. The university bought not only the premises owned by Miss Cairns but also the ground floor shops and pub facing the Cowgate, and the yard, formerly the school playground, behind.

Before Raymond Russell's instruments could be transported from the south of England, a formidable programme of adaptation and rebuilding was essential

at St Cecilia's Hall. The architectural firm appointed by the university was Ian G Lindsay & Partners. Lindsay (1906-1966), Scotland's leading authority on conservation and restoration at that time, had undertaken substantial restoration work on Scottish historic buildings throughout his career, with such clients as the church, the state, private owners and the National Trust for Scotland; his restorations ranged from the trust's vernacular "little houses" to great country houses and castles and Robert Mylne's church at Inverary. Lindsay's last work before his death was for Edinburgh University for, in addition to St Cecilia's Hall, he and his partner, John H Reid, were adapting some interiors of the Old College and creating a student residence out of Mylne's Court in the Lawnmarket – the tenements designed by Robert Mylne's great-grandfather.

Lindsay and Reid's brief for St Cecilia's Hall was fivefold: to repair the problematical north gable; to design and erect a new two-storey wing of considerable size on the yard to the east; to reconstruct the missing staircase and rebuild the upper flight of the surviving stair to allow entry from the concert hall into the 1812 room at the same level; to transform the pub into workshops and practice studios; and to integrate and link the whole complex, re-siting the main entrance over to the east side, accessed from the Cowgate. Gallery space with controlled atmospheric conditions was required for displaying the instruments; office and workshop space was needed for a curator and research students. Creating a public concert hall required an artists' room, a kitchen and cloakrooms, all of which entailed meeting the stringent demands of building and fire regulations. A grant of £6,000 was given by the Historic Buildings Council, which had first scheduled the place as an ancient monument in 1951 and which later listed it as a building of architectural and historic interest. Raymond Russell donated £5,000. The rest of the cost was borne by the university.

Working closely with the architects was the Reid Professor of Music, Sidney Newman, a leading light in the scheme. He undertook some research into the building's history and endeavoured, though without success, to establish the date of the alteration of the concert hall from ellipse to rectangle. His conjectural conclusion was that it dated from the Freemasons' occupation. The work was stalled by uncertainty over whether to proceed with the rectangular hall, which would have been cheaper, or to restore the ellipse, which threatened delay as well as extra cost. The conservationist argument won and Robert Mylne's elliptical



The hall had room for a concert. With an ornate arch it was 23 ft high. It had smaller audiences and a stage for the performance. The stage was on the right of the picture with the seats laid out in curved rows facing them, giving much better views.

concert room was created, as far as was possible in the absence of any surviving original plans or any trace of audience or the masonry. The auditorium's eighteenth-century seating arrangements, however, were not re-installed. Neither was the decorative plasterwork, mainly because the architects found no exact record of any original design.

Compromises generally had to be made in the restoration of detail. Professor Newman wrote in a memo to the university secretary:

As I saw it, the 'restoration' of the building can only be a partial restoration – a restoration in period style, character, in scheme and general presentation.

In effect, Mylne's interiors were stripped of the nineteenth and twentieth century additions and presented pristine, in the manner style of the 1960s, without any presence of period. The lecture, Lough Room and staircase, however, were over the years hung with paintings and tapestries from the university's former

collections. Copies of portraits of people associated with music in Scotland, lent by the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, were hung in the concert hall.

Today's Lough Room is used for student rehearsals and meetings, and by audiences during concert intervals. Purchasing 38 Niddry Street next door enabled Lindsay and Reid to create a large kitchen for internal refreshments and conference catering, a store and a hallkeeper's flat. Sadly, neither Ian Lindsay nor Raymond Russell lived to see the completion of the project. John Reid continued the work alone and the gallery as the east wing was designed by him, with close attention to the perspective of acoustic plaster on the walls and ceiling. He designed double-glazed windows to block external street noise and installed an electronic system for humidity and temperature control. As a tribute to Professor Newman's dedicated support for the scheme, Reid's gallery was named after him. Raymond Russell died intestate but his intention to give his collection to Edinburgh University was honoured by his mother, Maud.

On 28 June 1968, St Cecilia's Hall was formally opened, the opening ceremony performed by Maud Russell. The inaugural recital was given by the master harpsichordist Gustav Leonhardt, who played JS Bach and François Couperin on two of Raymond Russell's late eighteenth century harpsichords. Leonhardt was the first of many distinguished recitalists, among them some of his former students, who have performed early music in the revived concert room of St Cecilia's Hall, thus realising Raymond Russell's dream of "a fine situation of music". At the same time, under its first curator, John Barnes, and his successor, Ed Cairns O'Brien, the Russell Collection has endowed Mylne's concert hall with a permanent exhibition of outstanding musical instruments, a regularly used conference centre and a research department of international distinction.

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## Acknowledgements

Particular thanks to Patricia Cox who undertook most of the searches through the eighteenth and nineteenth century newspapers, and without whom this project might not have been completed. Thanks, too, to the archivists and librarians of the Edinburgh City Archive; the National Archives of Scotland; the National Monuments Record of Scotland; the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland; the National Library of Scotland; Edinburgh Public Library, particularly its Edinburgh Rooms; Heriot-Watt University Archive; Edinburgh University Special Collections, its Reid Music Library and its Estates and Buildings Department; the Cockburn Association; the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh; and to Robert Cooper, curator of the museum and library of the Grand Lodge of Antient Free and Accepted Masons of Scotland.

I am also grateful for information from the late John Barnes, Robert Bartholemew, Dr David Bebbington, the late Dr Robert Condie, Dr John Cranmer, Joy Fuller, Arthur Gavin, Ann Jones, Mary E Mackenzie, Prof Patrick O'Farrell, Dr Noel O'Regan, John Raymond, Prof David Walker and Derek Watson; and to all the former dancers at the Excelsior Ballroom who were happy to be interviewed and to reminisce.

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Published by The Friends of St Cecilia's Hall and the Russell Collection of Early Keyboard Instruments,  
 St Cecilia's Hall, Cowgate/Niddry Street, Edinburgh GB EH1 1LJ

Production and design: Martin Hillman

Printed by Dual Print, 40B Swanfield Ind. Est. Edinburgh EH16 5RX